

- Seminole**
- Dakota**
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## A DIY SLAM PART 1

Last month, I discussed the concept of a whitetail slam and why it's such an interesting pursuit. The slam was a dream I had many years ago, and my friend Tom Miranda now has brought it to reality with the Whitetail Slam record book and accompanying TV program on Sportsman Channel.

**BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL**

Most of us experienced hunters have harvested our share of deer. So I'm encouraging my fellow hunters to move beyond merely filling tags, or even

taking bucks of a certain antler score. Instead, I hope more will start to focus heavily on the experience. The idea of a whitetail slam dovetails nicely into that.

In the August issue, I identified the subspecies (whitetail subgroups) of the slam. Now I'll discuss each in more detail and reveal what you can look forward to, experientially, in pursuing the slam.

### DAKOTA

Overall, bucks in this subgroup are the heaviest, often weighing over 300

pounds on the hoof. These are harsh-climate animals that have evolved large body size in order to deal with extreme cold. However, their world also can get hot; they sometimes must cope with summer temperatures of 100 degrees F. or even higher.

As detailed last month, my first experience with this subgroup was with Dave Bzawy of Alberta Wilderness Guide Service. Through hunting with him, I learned you have to be prepared physically *and* mentally. It involves not only doing your homework but also being willing to put in all-day sits. You then must be able to make quick decisions on whether or not to shoot; rutting wilderness bucks seldom give you long to make up your mind.

Dakota whitetails are experiencing serious population declines in many areas, particularly within the southern part of their range. Montana's Milk River Valley herd, one of the most famous, has been decimated several times over the last few years by epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) and drought. Montana is reporting a whitetail harvest half as large as in 2006; North Dakota is down at least a third; South Dakota 58 percent; Wyoming is down two-thirds; and Nebraska about half.

I predict this is a lasting trend, with some years seeing increases following big declines. More and more, I'm thinking the days of ample big bucks could be ending in the southern part of this subgroup's range.

In Canada, EHD also is significant, along with high winterkill; however, I think Alberta and Saskatchewan will remain highly productive, primarily due to climatic limitations to whitetail overpopulation.

### DESERT

This subgroup is represented by a single subspecies: the Coues deer (pronounced "cows"). My experience with them began in the 1960s, when I was a budding biologist studying desert fauna in northern Mexico. My first Coues was taken incidentally in

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** ▶ Dr. Krull is founder and director of the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management & Research in Nacogdoches, Texas.



Sonora, and I really didn't think much about it at the time.

Over 40 years after my initial Coues experience, I returned to Sonora to hunt them with Jesus Fimbres, who owns the original Rancho Grande. Jesus is among the few folks I know who not only hunt Coues but also actively manage them.

These little deer are very difficult to hunt. You'll often read articles in which they're taken (or at least shot at) from extremely long range in rugged, brushy habitat. But from my perspective, the most satisfying ways to hunt them are spot-and-stalk and ambush hunting at waterholes. And anyone who harvests a Coues with a bow qualifies as a great hunter, in my book. (Tom Miranda has done it more than once.)

We lack adequate data on these populations, but my feeling is that they're holding their own. Access to these little guys in the U.S. is mostly on vast public lands or a few private ranches in Arizona and New Mexico, so north of the border this is a doable subgroup for the DIY hunter.

In Mexico, operations such as Rancho Grande have thriving Coues populations, but many Americans these days are reluctant to go to Mexico for a hunt. You'll have to make up your own mind, but I've been hunting there for years without issue. Then, again, in Mexico I *always* hunt through experienced, reputable outfitters.

**GULF COAST**

This is another little-known subgroup. Inhabiting the coastal marshes of Louisiana and Texas, these deer live in a tough place to hunt: swamps and marshes filled with eagle-sized mosquitoes. The primary vegetation is brush and emergent marsh plants, such as cattails and rushes.

Gulf Coast whitetails tend to rut in late September, so pursuing them can greatly expand your deer-hunting year. A good buck will score in the 120s to 130s — but again, it's not about the antlers, but rather the overall challenge and experience.

As far as hunting culture goes, be ready to have some fun with South

Louisiana Cajuns or Texas swamp cowboys. I've worked for years with rancher Brian Dunn, whose property near Port O'Connor, Texas, has one of the best-managed Gulf Coast herds in existence. My memories of hunting this subgroup include mud-covered boots, wet clothes and great stalks through cottonmouth-infested marshes.

Most Gulf Coast whitetails in Texas live on private lands, where cattle or crops such as rice dominate. Access isn't easy, but a few landowners offer pay hunts. There also is some opportunity to hunt them at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, a large area about midway down the state's coastline. While far more famous for supporting the world's only population of endangered whooping cranes, this NWR offers inexpensive deer hunts on a first-come, first-served basis. If you don't mind sitting in line for hours along the highway to get a permit, it's a good hunt.

There's little current data available on Gulf Coast whitetails at the

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subspecies level. But my view is that they're mostly holding their own. This is despite the fact their Texas habitat is fragmenting.

### NORTHWESTERN

This is the only subgroup for which I've been unsuccessful in taking a specimen. The Northwestern subgroup inhabits the mountains and hills of the Pacific Northwest. My buddy Gordon Whittington is one of the few people I know to have taken a Columbian whitetail (*Odocoileus virginianus leucurus*), which is the most geographically limited huntable subspecies. Northwestern whitetails probably are the most beautiful of all, with some actually having triple throat patches.

While unsuccessful, my own hunts in this region bring back fond memories. For instance, I recall sitting for hours in western Idaho, glassing the steep slopes alongside the Clearwater River with my friend Ron Fash. We once sat for an hour watching a gorgeous 12-point buck bedded on a ledge



For beautiful deer in beautiful habitat, consider the Northwest. Gordon Whittington took this buck with Washington's Wild Country Guide Service. Photo by Ross Smilko

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the top of a mountain. Although we were a mile or so away, the buck seemed to sense our presence. He was lying on a ledge in full view, apparently taking in the warm sun. As we were trying to devise a scheme to stalk him, he suddenly stood up, looked around and then moved just 10 yards to his left before bedding behind cover.

We worked our way up to the location, taking about two hours to carefully move into position, as rancher Eric Ewing kept an eye on the spot. But when we finally got into position for a shot, the buck had disappeared! It turned out there was a slight unseen depression behind the ledge, and he'd used it to slip away unnoticed. Big deer are clever no matter where you hunt them.

Sadly, Northwestern whitetails aren't faring that well overall. Idaho is holding its own, but Washington and Oregon are way down in overall population.

The Columbian whitetail of western Oregon and the mouth of the Columbia River was on the endangered species list for decades. However, a few permits for hunting the population around Roseburg, Oregon, became available in 2005. If you get a tag, it's a unique hunt. These deer aren't huge, but many have long brow tines.

For the Northwestern subgroup as a whole, much of the hunting is with landowners or outfitters. However, there are vast areas of timbered public lands anyone with a tag can hunt, especially in eastern Washington. I suggest you move this subgroup to the top of your list while you can.

### NORTHERN WOODLANDS

When I think about hunting "northern" whitetails, raucous hunting camps and red-plaid jackets come to mind. Deer in the Great North Woods make their home in white cedar swamps, big stands of red and white pine and hills covered with colorful oaks, maples and poplar ("popples"). Hunting strategies include drives and stand sitting. Bucks here can be almost as large as those in the Dakota subgroup, but their color is quite different: a reddish hue, often with pure-white throat patches and "boots."

I've hunted this subgroup from New Brunswick west to Ontario and south to Michigan and Illinois. These



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memories include the smell of sweet fern and popple in the air and willow bark on the base of a big buck's antlers gripped tightly in my hands.

But it's the camp life that makes this hunting so special. If you decide to go there, try falling in with one of the many family-oriented clubs or camps. You'll enjoy the hunting traditions and rich food that mark pursuing deer in this part of the world.

The Northern Woodlands subgroup probably is seeing the greatest decline of all, though few wildlife professionals will admit it. I can't think of a single state or province that isn't experiencing some population decline. Reasons are many and complex, depending on location, but the most common is loss of quality habitat from industrial agriculture and overpopulation from mismanagement. I've spent a great deal of time in the last few years touring Midwestern states and examining habitat quality. The woodlots and timber stringers adjacent to agricultural fields have deteriorated at a frightening rate!

Extensive use of chemicals on crops also has played a part, and then there is the ever-present EHD. In areas where management on private lands is common, there's more hope. If you want to hunt this subgroup, I suggest you either find a good outfitter or join a hunting club with a history of real deer management. There are folks in Wisconsin, for example, who have some incredible Northern Woodlands hunting.

#### SEMINOLE

If you take on the challenge of harvesting a Seminole whitetail, you're in for a real treat. These are swamp deer, and they're in many ways unlike the other subgroups.

First off, living in Florida, they're subtropical to tropical animals. And as such, they share many of the characteristics of other tropical species of deer, such as axis deer from India. Whitetails use day length as a cue for priming the rut, so in areas where day and night lengths are roughly equal, or where seasons

are quite different from those in most of North America, the rut can differ significantly from what we tend to call "normal." This is the case with the Seminole subgroup.

For purposes of developing the slam, we decided to call all subspecies that inhabit Florida "Seminole." Yet there are two subspecies: *O. v. seminolus* and *O. v. osceola*. They are distinct subspecies with different rut patterns. Interestingly, the true Seminole can rut as early as July 15. Unfortunately you can't hunt them at that time. Obviously, this makes hunting in November a real challenge, especially when you factor in where they live: the alligator- and snake-infested swamplands of southern Florida. Here, the hunting tradition involves using airboats or other small boats to slip along through the marshes.

My experiences with these awesome little deer has been in the Fort Myers area, where I worked with ALICO (Atlantic Land and Investment Company), who own thousands of



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acres of agricultural and ranch country to the east. I also hunt them with my friend Capt. Andy Pis in the same area.

South Florida ranchers have every bit as much history with the cowboy lifestyle as do those in Texas. Where you hunt Seminoles, you'll encounter men who work their cattle herds with dogs and horses and eat lunch at a real bunkhouse. There are two seasons in South Florida: rainy and dry. And deer season often comes during the dry season. Cool-season food plots such as oats and clover don't do very well in this region, but warm-season plantings of cowpeas or alyce-clover (a pseudoclover from India) help feed deer during hunting season.

If you decide to pursue the Seminole whitetail, take plenty of insect repellent and rubber boots, even in the "dry" season. The bucks bed in palmetto thickets on high spots in the swamps. And keep your eyes open; on my hunts with Capt. Andy, more than one has been

spoiled by a Florida panther that nonchalantly strolled onto the scene! This cat is an endangered species and thus can't be harmed in any way. Nor can the region's monstrously large black bears, as they also have legal immunity from hunting. Bears love to destroy corn feeders, making deer baiting difficult.

Although Florida whitetail numbers are declining, you still might be able to find a good Seminole hunt if you put in the effort. Unfortunately, many Florida hunters and landowners have only recently come to the idea of seriously managing deer.

### SOUTH-CENTRAL PLAINS

These whitetails inhabit the prairies, brushlands and savannas of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Arkansas, and parts of Iowa, Colorado and Mexico. They really represent two subspecies: *O. v. texanus* and *O. v. macrourus*. The many large ranches of the region have developed hunting traditions and strategies unique to their habitats and

hunting regulations.

The techniques most often associated with rifle hunting in this region are rattling and spot-and-stalk hunting. This is the area in which rattling first appeared, and probably its best practitioners reside here. Until you've rattled in a mature South-Central Plains buck, you haven't experienced the totality of deer hunting. My own experiences here include 50 years of rattling from brush blinds, crawling through thornbrush and sneaking down ravines to get a shot.

This subgroup is one of the few you can hunt aggressively on foot, because there's often plenty of room to go after a buck. In South Texas, I like to pursue a "breeding party" as it moves across the landscape. You can make all of the noise you want while closing the gap, as long as it fits in with what goes on with deer during the rut.

With the exceptions of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, populations of this subgroup are declining for a host of reasons, among them

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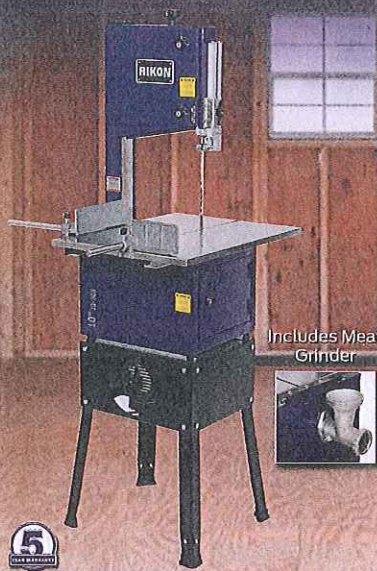
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EHD, predation and loss of habitat. Arkansas is one of only three states with an expanding herd. Texas, of course, has a long history of private-land management. Most DIY options in the region would be outside the Lone Star State.

### SOUTHEASTERN

Last, but not least, is the Southeastern whitetail. I've been fortunate to meet some of the best whitetail hunters of the modern era, and many of them have been from this region. Here the vegetation is about as thick as you'll find. Sight distances are often under 20 yards; deer appear and are gone again in seconds. That obviously makes hunting a challenge.

In a few places, variations on the classic Southern technique of ambush hunting include hunting with hounds. Although some hunters' question whether this is "fair chase," nothing's more exciting than waiting for a deer to emerge from the thick vegetation with hounds in pursuit. Unfortunately, this method is rapidly disappearing

due to land fragmentation; if you ever want to try it, go as soon as you can. North and South Carolina, as well as parts of eastern Virginia, are probably the best places to hunt with an outfitter or club using hounds.

Most states in the regions have reported reduced harvests, and presumably populations, since 2000. Georgia is an exception, probably due to overall better management. North and South Carolina populations have been up and down, with predation and habitat being the primary factors. Virginia is showing signs of herd decline.

### MORE SUBGROUPS TO COME?

Additional subgroups or subspecies could be added to the slam in the future. Right now, I'm looking at Mexico as the great new frontier for whitetail hunting in the mid- to latter 21st century — provided that country can resolve problems currently dissuading outside hunters from traveling there.

For instance, there's the little-known Carmen Mountain whitetail, which ranges from higher elevations of West

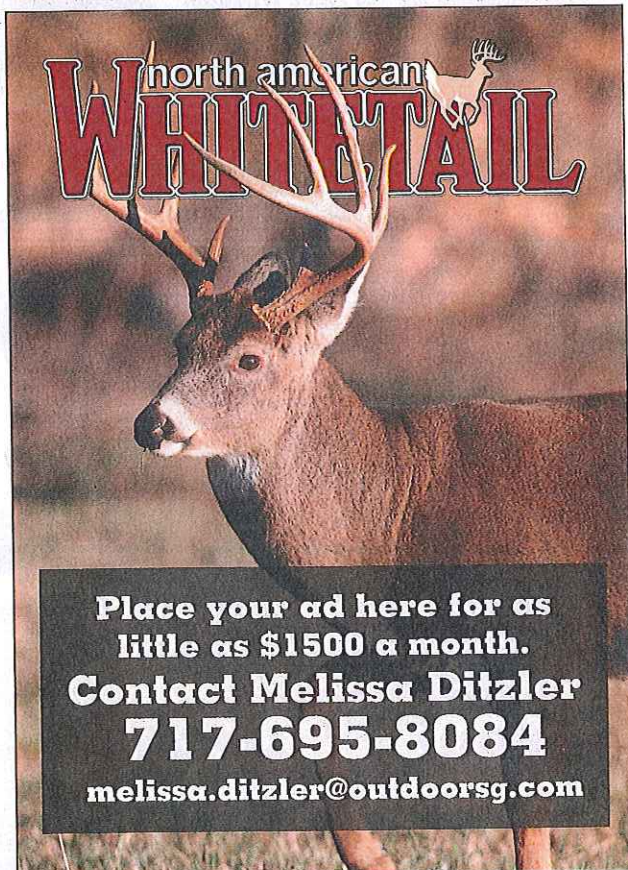
Texas down through the Sierra Del Carmen mountain range of Coahuila, Mexico. I have a long history with these tiny deer and shot one on a waterhole several years ago. Not only are they very challenging to hunt, but they coexist with jaguars and Mexican black bears.

Other huntable subspecies in the region would make up a subgroup we'd call "Tropical" whitetails. This would include a great number of subspecies not found in the U.S. or northern Mexico, such as the Yucatan whitetail (*O. v. yucatanensis*). Some scientists think all of these subspecies should be classified as the Yucatan whitetail. But even if they are, they'd be a new subgroup in the slam.

### IN CONCLUSION

Attempting a whitetail slam isn't for everyone. But for many maturing hunters, it's a quest worth trying. At worst you'll have a lot of fun, travel to some interesting places and meet fellow hunters who might look at deer a little differently than you do. **NAW**

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